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NATO Supreme Allied Commander Transformation Stresses Alliance's Post-Cold War Relevance

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Article By: *Barbara Honegger*

NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, French Air Force General Stephane Abrial, strongly defended the post-Cold War relevance of "the most successful alliance in history" at the Secretary of the Navy Guest Lecture at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), Feb. 24.

The first European to be permanently appointed to head a strategic NATO command in the Alliance's 60-year history, Abrial was in Monterey to keynote the second NATO Building Integrity Conference on the theme of reducing corruption and building integrity, transparency and accountability in defense ministries.

Abrial was introduced by NPS Dean of Students, Capt. Alan Poindexter, who noted that the two had flown together in Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s when the speaker commanded the French Air Force's 5th Fighter Squadron.

"Thank you very much, Captain Poindexter, for the opportunity to address such a vibrant audience of Naval Postgraduate School faculty and students. I am all the more grateful, as I don't believe visits by NATO commanders to this school are all that frequent. NATO has become almost synonymous with the concept of 'Atlanticism' and we don't have a very strong presence on the Pacific Coast.

"Physical distances aside, the most important message I have for you today is that NATO is as relevant to the whole of its member nations' territories and the whole of their forces as it was when it was founded six decades ago. It is often described – rightly I believe – as the most successful [mutual defense] alliance in history. If we look back to its record during the Cold War, NATO epitomized Sun Tzu's observation that the best victory is winning without battle."

Abrial emphasized the Alliance's increasing relevance to the future careers of the NPS officer students he addressed.

"As you complete this demanding course, which will considerably broaden our professional horizons, NATO should loom large in your vision of the strategic challenges to come," he said. "As your careers progress, almost all of you will be having more contacts with forces and headquarters from other countries, as well as from NATO, than you have had until now. First, this is because the higher up the chain of command you are, the more your environment becomes international; and, second, the future security of all our nations and the pressure of our current and emerging challenges call for increased emphasis on multinational arrangements and endeavors.

"As a reminder of the sheer weight of the Alliance," Abrial noted, the U.S. and NATO together spend seven out of 10 defense dollars worldwide. "But more importantly, what makes NATO unique is not just its size, but the intensity of the links that bind its members together. Its cornerstone is the assurance that an armed attack against one of its members will be considered an attack against all."

Abrial recalled the September 11 attacks as a key turning point in NATO's history.

"Later this year, the 10th anniversary of 9/11 will remind us that on the first day after the attacks – on the 12th of September – all of NATO's members, 19 at the time, activated this mutual-defense clause for the first time in the Alliance's history, and it is still the basis for the Alliance standing together in Afghanistan today."

Abrial also stressed the increasingly coalition nature of NATO operations, especially in Afghanistan, which he called the Alliance's "most urgent concern."

"In Afghanistan, we have 48 troop-contributing nations, with 20 of them – almost half – from outside NATO. In fact, this is an operation that would probably not have even taken place if it were not international. Though the U.S. provides two thirds of the Alliance's 132,000 troops, the over 40,000 troops contributed by other nations are essential to operational success, to pooling resources and capabilities, and to building shared doctrine, training, standards and interoperability. And it's not just a matter of quantity. As the U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counter-Insurgency [COIN] Field Manual states, 'Many other countries' military forces bring cultural backgrounds, historical experiences and other capabilities that can be particularly valuable to COIN efforts.'

"The U.S. National Military Strategy published just two weeks ago affirms that, though this country is ready, if necessary, to engage in operations alone, it will do so 'preferably with partners and allies,'" Abrial added. "And my own country's Defense White Paper of two years ago states that 'save in exceptional cases, all [of France's future] military operations will take place in a multinational framework.' Indeed, France's full return into NATO's Integrated Military Structure as of 2009 is in part due to this acknowledgement."

Outside of Afghanistan, Abrial said the Alliance's most pressing emerging challenge is its collective response to the dissemination of weapons of mass destruction.

"One of the most important decisions in the history of the Alliance was last November when NATO heads of state and government met in Lisbon, to set up a NATO Ballistic Missile Defense system," he said.

"Another major category of challenges is those that take place in the Global Commons – the high seas and international waterways, international airspace, outer space and cyberspace – in which freedom of action is the condition for any projection of power, and I'm sure that the Naval Postgraduate School is on the case in assessing the challenges in these mission critical domains.

"All of these emerging challenges are multinational by nature," Abrial stressed. "Because no single country can successfully tackle them alone, NATO is a good place to start, and we are looking domain by domain at what the needs are and how to move forward." In particular, he cited NATO's anti-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia, its Operation Active Endeavor counterterrorism operations in the Mediterranean initiated in the wake of 9/11, and the Alliance's cyber incident response capability now nearing full operational capability.

"The new NATO must, above all, be a more engaged NATO," Abrial concluded. "Being able to engage in fruitful dialogue with a wide range of players – from partner nations and government agencies to NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and private entrepreneurs takes a special mindset. We need openness and greater knowledge of the wider world, but we also need to be confident as military and aware of the strengths we can bring to the table. I can think of no institution that better typifies this state of mind than the Naval Postgraduate School. I am sure your education here will help you do wonders when you leave for your next postings."

Abrial's military career is as international as his most recent appointment. Born in southwestern France in 1954, Abrial graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1974 and returned to his home country to complete fighter pilot training at the French Air Force Academy. He served with units of the German Luftwaffe and the Greek Air Force in 1981 and 1988 respectively.



NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, French Air Force General Stephane Abrial, strongly stressed the post-Cold War relevance of the alliance of 28 nations during his Secretary of the Navy Guest Lecture at NPS, Feb. 24. (U.S. Navy photo by Javier Chagoya / Released).

his home country to complete fighter pilot training at the French Air Force Academy. He served with units of the German Luftwaffe and the Greek Air Force, in 1987 and 1988 respectively, and later graduated from the U.S. Air War College, in 1992.

Abrial has broad tactical, operational and strategic experience at both NATO Headquarters and in coalition environments. After serving on NATO's International Military Staff in Brussels from 1996 to 1999, he graduated from the French Institute for Advanced Studies in National Defense. Abrial then acquired broad experience in political-military affairs through several appointments to the offices of the President and Prime Minister of France. Following these positions, he served as head of France's air defense and air operations, and as the country's Air Force Chief of Staff, from 2000 to 2006.

Abrial has been elevated to a Grand Officer in the French Legion of Honor, and was awarded the German Verdienstkreuz der Bundeswehr (silver).

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